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ABSTRACT

Reader-response criticism may elucidate the relationship between reading and knowing. Unfortunately, discussions of stylistics and convention in anthologies of reader response criticism tend to focus on fairly specialized literary problems. David Bleich's subjective paradigm provides a framework through which the study of both response and interpretation can be actively integrated with the experience of response and interpretation, thereby transforming knowledge from something to be acquired into something that can be synthesized on behalf of self and community. However, his theory shortchanges the role of history, both in relation to the text and to the community of readers. What is needed is a philosophical grounding in a theory of understanding. Hans-Georg Gadamer provides such a theory. Gadamer broadens the scope of hermeneutic studies to include the conditions of understanding. To Gadamer, the scene of understanding is a conversation composed of question and answer. Just as the reader speaks from a point of view, so does the text, and the process of their communication Gadamer calls a "fusion of horizons." For this fusion to take place, the reader must first acquaint himself or herself with the text's tradition, by asking questions of the informational type, for example. Gadamer's hermeneutics can provide a basis for developing writing across the curriculum disciplinary approach in which the reading and writing are tied to a disciplinary methodology, a genuine context, a set of conventions, and a content. (HOD)

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Gadamer, Hermeneutics, and Composition

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Gadamer, Hermeneutics, and Composition

By now it is almost a cliche to claim that writing is a way of knowing (or a mode of discovery, or a way of viewing the world), though of course the cliche means slightly different things depending on the speaker. Most of us faced with freshman writers know, however, that all too often writing is <u>not</u> where they discover that "click of comprehension" but where they are apt to rehearse received opinion and half-truths. To claim, then, that <u>reading</u> is a way of knowing is but to assert another truism, and I do so only to mark off the ideological boundaries of my argument. For I know also that words often go in one eye and out the other without necessarily affecting the ways students "know" the world. The burden of pedagogy is to make reading and writing a way of knowing, but any such pedagogical efforts must be founded on a theory of what it means to read, to write, and -- most important -- to know.

What do we know about reading? Empirical research offers an extremely complex and sometimes contradictory picture of the reading process. Brain studies suggest that cognitive styles may be determined by innate brain hemisphericity and even that these styles may be gender-determined. Psycholinguistics, in examining memory and text-processing constraints, finds evidence that the short term memory is capable of storing something like five to nine bits of information, and that certain sentence patterns aid our ability to extract propositional content. Studies have also shown that we process material differently according to our purposes and according to our experience, or

our developmental stage as readers. These studies show too that our reading expectations operate according to conventions, so that we tend to find what we expect to find. Some studies have attempted to categorize the modes of comprehension (response to syntax, deduction, connection) and the kinds of responses (interpretive, evaluative, associative, etc.). We sub-vocalize when the reading gets tough. Even the text's arrangement on the page (what is referred to as "document design") plays an important role in the reader's ability to process information.

The problem is to know exactly what to do with all this information -- how to incorporate it into a theory if not a practice. This problem is actually twofold. First, we must know how to intepret the data itself. There are, for example, many promising looking studies which claim to measure or evaluate "comprehension." However, these studies tend to equate comprehension with memory and/or the ability to extract propositional content. While memory plays a role in comprehension, it is not identical with comprehension, and until researchers can compensate for this problem, it will be difficult to utilize their findings. One possible way to obviate the problem of equating reading with memory is offered by the thinking-aloud protocols, where the reading subjects record out loud what they are "thinking" as they are reading. Ostensibly this research methodology can therefore test thinking or reading, not memory. However, this methodology would seem to interfere substantially with the "thinking" process, making the findings again difficult to utilize.

Second, we must be wary of the uses to which this data is put. The apparent wish of much composition theory is to make the field "scientific" -- to justify our existence on empirical grounds. In the opening of George Dillon's recent book, Constructing Texts, the author notes the tendency in the field of composition to use studies of reading, for example, to assess readability, the premise being that by understanding how people read, we might then be better able to tell them how to write. Empirical research has particular appeal for those like E. D. Hirsch who wish to establish a "scientific basis for rules of writing." Dillon argues that particularly with the state of empirical research at present, a scientific basis for composition is impossible. Nor, I would add, is it desireable. It seems that we should learn from the mistakes of other humanistic disciplines which seek to imitate the presumed objectivity of the sciences -- and I am thinking particularly of literary studies where, in the attempt to serve the god of the sciences, literary criticism has encouraged decades of formalist studies which are unable to account for the very things that define the "humanities." This is not to say that empirical studies have no place in humanistic disciplines, for indeed they have an important place. We can use the findings to test our theories, but we must be careful not to reduce our theories to the findings: we must be careful not to confuse what is with what ought to be, means with ends, or, as Gadamer would say, method with truth.

Let me turn, then, from the empirical side of composition theory to literary theory, to what is now broadly labelled as

reader-response criticism, in this search for a theory of reading and knowing.[1] Reader-response criticism holds two promises. First, for literary theory, this approach offers an alternative to the various strains of formalist criticism which focus their entire attention on the literary object as such. Reader-response criticism acknowledges the role of the reader in producing meaning, challenging thus the formalist assumption that meaning resides in the text. It is this productive emphasis that might elucidate the relationship between reading and knowing. Second, for composition theory, reader-response criticism promises to initiate a much-needed dialogue between those teaching "reading" (literature) and those teaching writing. Indeed, both literary theory and composition theory are waving the banner of "process": while literary critics abandon the literary product in favor of the reading process, composition specialists abandon the composed product in favor of the composing process.

These promises are only partially fulfilled. It is clear from the first that reader-response criticism, at least in its early stages, is not concerned with "real" readers, but with ideal readers. That in itself, however, is not an objection: the pedagogical imperative is to turn the real student readers into ideal ones. But do I want to -- or should I -- turn my students into Stanley Fish? No, the real problem is that these ideal readers are also really ideal literary readers. Discussions of stylistics and convention in anthologies of reader-response criticism tend to focus on fairly specialized

literary problems. In addition, the historical situation of the reader has not received sufficient attention. While theorists may acknowledge the historical nature of reading conventions, there has been little work on the specific historical, social, and economic conditions which influence conventions -- such institutional pressures, for example, as publishing, hiring, and tenure decisions, etc. Thus, the reader-response position is too narrow: it is not historical enough to obviate the problems of formalism, and it is too specifically literary to attract other humanistic disciplines. Though the reader-response critics have abandoned the explicit privileging of literary discourse as a repository of special knowledge, this privileging still seems to operate implicitly.

The work of David Bleich would seem to offer an alternative to these concerns. Bleich's theory of reading concerns real readers in a real community: his "subjective" paradigm provides, as he says, "a framework through which the study of both response and interpretation may be actively integrated with the experience of response and interpretation, thereby transforming knowledge from something to be acquired into something that can be synthesized on behalf of oneself and one's community."[2] His theory seems a good deal more practical, at least from the point of view of a composition classroom. Bleich recognizes that individual readers will have different interests -- that is, their interpretations will be differently motivated. In order to arrive at consensus, readers negotiate for a collectively

similar response. The "chief reader" -- the teacher -- is part of this community, not necessarily an authority in it.

While Bleich's theory lends itself to broad pedagogical application, his theory again shortchanges the role of history, both in relation to the text and to the "community" of readers. His community does not extend outside of the classroom, and he grants to this community absolute authority over the interpretation of the text. In the interests of preserving the subjectivity of a "real" reader's response, he removes the text from its place in the broader spectrum of tradition.

Thus, neither the empirically-based composition position nor the reader-response literary position offers a sufficiently broad theory of reading and knowing. What we need in composition is a philosophical grounding in a theory of understanding. For such a theory, we turn to Hans-Georg Gadamer.

While hermeneutics has traditionally been concerned with the problem of meaning, especially of sacred texts, Gadamer broadens the scope of hermeneutic studies: for him, the fundamental issue is not meaning as such, but the conditions of understanding. Gadamer argues that understanding is by nature linguistic. "Language," he says, " is a central point where 'I' and the world meet."[3] This meeting, which requires interpretation at some level, is structured by the dialectic of question and answer, a dialectic based in large part on Gadamer's reading of the Platonic dialogues. Thus, the scene of understanding is a conversation composed of question and answer. Although the goal of this conversation is communication -- or understanding --, this occurs not by plan, but by mutual give and take, detouring perhaps even through misunderstanding. There is, then, no

"method" for a conversation; it occurs according to the mutual interests exhibited at the scene of understanding.

Where does a conversation -- or a questioning -- begin? It may begin with questions of an informational sort, the way a doctor, for example, asks questions of a patient, but this sort of question is only a preliminary to the "real" questions. The true question, according to Gadamer, does more than elicit information; it is neither a pedagogical question (which, says Gadamer, lacks a questioner) nor a rhetorical question (which lacks both a questioner and an object, cf. TM p. 327). Rather, the true question acknowledges the openness of questioning, the sort of question which, as the Socratic dialogues illustrate, begins with a recognition of ignorance. Thus, understanding is not a determinate phenomenon, for "the real and basic nature of a question . . . /is/ to make things indeterminate" (TM, p. 338). Gadamer argues that the ability to ask the question cannot be taught, though it can, I would argue, be facilitated through the careful use of heuristics. The ratios of Burke's Pentad, for example, provide at least a preliminary grid that enables an inexperienced -- or perhaps merely uninspired -- reader/thinker to begin a conversation with a text.

According to Gadamer, the question will arise out of the reader's own place in tradition, that is, the reader's place in history, her awareness of conventions, her very ability to pose a question. Tradition is not a fixed, objectifiable "thing," but a flux which changes with the reader's experience and education. Most important, it is fundamentally linguistic. Given, then,

that a question is always asked from a point of view within tradition, no question can be neutral; it will be motivated by the reader's hisotrical and social conditions, which define her interests, her passions. This is the reader's prejudice. Insofar as we must understand a question in order to ask it, a reader's prejudice provides the anticipatory movement of understanding, where the reader initially construes what is meant and begins the dialogue with the text. Thus Gadamer embraces what a good empiricist tries to eliminate: the subjectivity of understanding.

But Gadamer reminds us that prejudices are not merely subjective, for they reveal the conventions, the communality that ties each individual to a tradition. We find and define that communality in the process of education; and, while we are always a product of that education, we are not a mere pawn of it. Tradition, Gadamer says, "is not simply a precondition into which we come, but we produce it ourselves, inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition, and hence further determine it ourselves" (TM, p.261). Gadamer cautions us, then, to be aware of our tradition, our prejudices, for, "It is the tyranny of hidden prejudices that makes us deaf to the language that speaks to us in tradition" (TM, p. 239). An experienced reader is generally unaware of her tradition and takes such questions as might occur to her as completely unmotivated and neutral. A pedagogy thus must not only create a communality of conventions tying individuals to tradition but also expose the <u>interests</u> of those conventions.

It is for this reason that "community" must always be understood in its broad, historical context -- that is, it must extend beyond the immediate classroom.

Just as the reader speaks from a point of view, so does the text, and the process of their communication Gadamer calls a "fusion of horizons." For this fusion to take place, the reader must first acquaint herself with the text's tradition, by asking questions of the informational type, for example. Only after such preliminaries have taken place can a true conversation begin. Gadamer thus accords equal authority to both text and reader, so that understanding, while it may be subjective, is not solipsistic. A student's or an inexperienced reader's horizon may be quite restricted, so restricted that no "fusion" could take place. For this reason, pedagogy works both to make the horizon visible to the reader and to broaden that horizon -- and enable the reader especially to see beyond "the tyranny of hidden prejudices." To account for this aspect of understanding, Gadamer revitalizes the Aristotelian notion of phronesis, a practical knowledge which Gadamer calls application. While phronesis is an applied knowledge, it is not applied the way a craftsman applies his knowledge for a specific end. Rather, it is a means, not an end, toward ethical action. Broadly seen, application involves being able to see what is at stake in a conversation.

Such a theory of understanding would provide the foundation for a different pedagogy of reading, writing, and knowing than that supplied by either empirical studies or reader-response theory.

Understanding, for Gadamer, is not primarily a process of acquiring methodologically assured findings; it is not a cumulative appropriation, a means of mastering an objective order of things. It is not a matter of memory or propositional content. Understanding goes beyond this sort of ratified knowledge, uniting it with both interpretation and application. At the same time, understanding is not merely a theoretical proposition; it involves real readers in real historical dialogues with real texts. To teach reading on this basis, then, implies more than teaching a skill; rather, it implies engaging in an ongoing dialogue on the conditions and limitations of understanding. Practically speaking, classroom practice would have to recognize that students generally lack a knowledge of tradition (historical and linguistic), lack an awareness of their own horizon, and, as a consequence, lack the ability to ask a true question. While composition teachers are continually cautioned against turning the classroom into courses on social issues, history, or literature, at the same time, we cannot expect our students to ask intelligent questions out of the void. I am struck by the paradox of the position which says, "we must teach thinking, not things to think about." Gadamer shows that understanding is contextual, that we cannot divorce thinking from its object. A genuine attention to process in the composition classroom -- process in both reading and writing -- would not attempt to divorce the process from its material basis, and will not shrink from examing what makes understanding possible.

Current textbooks, as recent essays have demonstrated, are generally not adequate to real process. This is especially true, and most dangerously so, of the so-called "readers," which, by de-contextualizing their contents, encourage a reader to view the texts in formal or ahistorical terms. While readers are certainly more convenient from the point of view of curriculum planning, they mirror in many ways the delusions of television, implying that ideas (experiences) occur in neatly packageable ten-page (fifteen minute) increments. The writing across the curriculum movement seems a promising alternative, in which the reading and writing done in a composition classroom are tied to a disciplinary methodology, a genuine context, a set of conventions, and a content. Gadamer's hermeneutics would provide the basis for developing this pedagogical approach, with a focus on the hermeneutics of understanding.

While Gadamer speaks of the "hermeneutically trained mind," we are generally faced with students who have not been hermeneutically trained. Our methods should help them to understand their own horizon and that of the text -- whether that be Heart of Darkness, the newspaper, a coup in Central America, or the student's own text. Reading, for Gadamer, clearly involves more than just "reading." Insofar as understanding is linguistic, it comprises both reading and writing in the process of understanding.

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NOTES

[1] For an overview of reader-response criticism, the reader may consult two very useful collections of essays: Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); and The Reader in the Text, ed. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

[2] David Bleich, "Epistemological Assumptions in the Study of Response," in Reader-Response Criticism, p. 136.

[3] Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1982), p. 431. All quotations are from this English translation of Wahrheit und Methode; further references will be found in the text, cited as TM.